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# AN ARTISAN POET

BY DEWI J. WILLIAMS

THAT cultural achievement is not incompatible with manual labor has many times been proved, and it is one of the cheering signs in a materialistic age that the lot of peasants and artisans in all countries is taking an upward trend into the field of thought while not deserting that of action. In no people has this combination of culture and labor been more apparent than in the Welsh, the bulk of whom are peasants and "working men", but with a tradition and history for literary effort that go back some fourteen centuries. That Wales has not been awarded her place among the greatest literary nations can be traced to a complexity of causes, one of which is the inherent difficulty of adequate and accurate translation of Celtic poetry into a Teutonic language. But there has recently been published a volume of verse written in English, and so within the scope of all Anglo-Saxon lovers of literature. The book is entitled *Through the Upcast Shaft*, and comprises the poetic work of a young Welsh miner. Though it is too early to prophesy the rising of a star which shall become one of the first magnitude, yet it is safe to say that here we have a notable example of literary achievement under circumstances that in the case of most other men would prove, if not an insurmountable obstacle, at the least a serious handicap to intellectual development.

Huw Menai Williams, born in Carnarvonshire, Wales, of peasant parentage, became cognizant of the pecuniary limitations of his native district, and at the age of sixteen trudged afoot to the coal-mines of Glamorgan, then—some thirty-odd years ago—regarded as an El Dorado by the poorly-paid agricultural laborers of the north. From that time to the present day he has lived the life and carried out the duties of a coal-miner, and it was during his hours of grimy toil far underground that the Muse inspired him to poesy. Lacking the education which we nowadays consider

necessary to every child, he is intellectually a "self-made man", and has acquired his knowledge and self-education during his few leisure hours after the arduous duties of a miner. His performance is all the more meritorious when it is remembered that this poet sings in a foreign tongue; indeed, one of the most striking features of his work is his marvelous command of English. Ellis Lloyd, the well-known author of *Scarlet Nest* and other novels, in his introduction to this little book, says of Huw Menai (that being his *nom de plume*): "Yet, lonely and hampered as he has been, unaided, and under the daily yoke of exhausting manual labor, he has expanded his poetic soul and has created poems which are amazing in their stark individuality, their rhythm, their range of thought, and in the exquisite beauty of their imagery."

Following his literary compatriots, past and present, Huw Menai sings chiefly of nature, love, religion, native country, and war, though the last is not treated in the abstract so much as in particular reference to the World War. But he also finds beauty and poetry in subjects not commonly associated with them. For how many modern poets would tenderly and feelingly apostrophize a butterfly, its wings and limbs shattered on a bit of broken glass on the "tip" (slag-heap)? The majority of Menai's poems are on subjects of Nature, and it is in these that we find his excellence most consistent. But in all his poems we are thrilled with the joy of life and the optimism of faith, the whole clothed in a wealth of imagery and an astounding aptness and virility of expression. His ode, *On the Road*, carries us bodily along with a swinging rhythm to the "eternal dawn" that—

will break some day  
To the rhythm of the road.

Some of his poetic descriptions are delightful. In describing the butterfly, he depicts her as working "a pattern on the mother-rays" of the sun, and "fringing an ode thereon", all of which he epitomizes as "poetic lace". Two words—yet what a wealth of meaning! The swallow's "graceful curve" he describes as

The line that Rodin loved to carve,  
And Wagner strove to sound.

His description of a child reads:

Her eyes were dreams, her lips were love,  
Her cheeks were like the noon.

\* \* \*

Her voice was one sweet melody,  
Her hair was perfect night;  
Her kiss a song, her presence all  
A source of pure delight.

Again, his *May Musings*, in which he extols his native country, contains this masterpiece of sequence of thought, musical in expression as in conception:

Sweet linnets shook young leaves with chorus gay,  
While streamlet symphonies rhymed through the mirth,  
To blend in choral union with the day—  
To join the oratorio of new birth,  
That swelled in gladness from the re-awakened earth.

Later on in the same ode his patriotic enthusiasm finds expression in the following exquisite harmony and imagery:

Dear Wales! Sweet home of rivers, lakes, and rills!  
Pan's wondrous passion made her spirit proud!  
She draws the soul of sunshine to her hills,  
And o'er her fields the lark is singing loud  
For joy, that he has been by God allowed  
To pour his soul upon a land so fair.  
Her rugged mountains kiss the snow-white cloud—  
Mist-surpliced oft they stretch their hands in prayer—  
One feels much nearer Heaven in Wales than anywhere.

Who can deny the divine inspiration of the lark's outpouring?  
Or of the priestly mountains, "mist-surpliced" and prayerful?  
Possibly for wealth of thought in fewness of words, he is at his best in *The Geologist*:

Shaking the dust from truth, I watched him swing  
The midget sledge for Science and Love's sake,  
Until the beaten stones break out and sing  
Of blue lagoons, nymph-haunted nooks, and take  
The mind to live among  
Those bygone days when Pan was young;  
Part-reading in the hard primæval sod  
The infinite biography of God.

If the whole stanza may not live for aye, surely that last couplet must deserve immortality, pregnant as it is with an immensity of meaning!

Sometimes he writes of depressing things, but always with that optimistic faith that seems to argue the deep-rooted conviction that, to quote his own words, "Kind God blames not His own created things," and that "All is divinely wrought". The certainty of Ultimate Goodness, which he sees portrayed in the wonderful and awe-inspiring beauties of Nature, affect him with a healthful *joie de vivre*; nor is he downcast when Nature's face is gloomy, while in the midst of life's tragedies he has ever before his eyes the Greatest Tragedy of all and its lesson, as witness the last stanza of his *Clinging*:

Clutching at the straws of creed—no substance there!  
Philosophy a bubble, and Science bare!  
Struggling against wave and wave, toss and toss,  
To find sure hold at last in the battered Cross.

Of war he writes but little, but here he displays best his vigor of language. In his description of *The Attack*, where concatenation of sounds—which forms in a measure the metric basis of the older school of native Welsh poetry—assists his own and the reader's imagination, he carries us right into the heart of things and takes us back a few years to the time when we were experiencing that very action which he describes so minutely: his picture is so terribly accurate and so accurately terrible. More nakedly terrible and less to be liked by the timid are his *Reprisals* and *Revolution*. In *The Kaiser* he unites the same virility of expression with a moralizing reflectiveness (which may not be without a significant political application!):

Nay! hang him not; let live, and let the sun  
Search out his conscience, and the wrath divine  
Wring from his heart the uttermost remorse;

\* \* \*

True, a gallows stands  
In every conscience; and the hangman's noose  
Forever slack or tight about the soul—  
Inherited from all eternity—  
Shall squeeze in measure as the crime deserves.

At the opposite pole to this is his tenderness in *Eyes Right*, where he speaks of warriors who have shown the "greater love". This ode was inspired by Lady Butler's famous picture of a file of British "Tommies" returning from battle (says the poet: "You have shaken hands with Death, and you are better men"); as they pass a wayside cross, the officer salutes and gives the command, "Eyes Right!" The last stanza reads:

Rain-plashed, shell-weathered Crucifix, beside  
A broken road. The Saviour of the slain,  
Whom pain salutes, because a greater pain  
Filled that great Heart. And tears immortal, too,  
He shed o'er all their failings; and, besides,  
He died for them, as they have died for you.

That Huw Menai's poetry is everywhere perfect would be a false claim, which I have no intention of making. But certain it is that most of it reaches a height seldom attained by poets of the present generation. To have done this under the limitative conditions under which he wrote is indeed an achievement worthy of perpetuation, inspiring hope that the voice that came out of the bowels of the earth and "through the upcast shaft" will soon again, and long, be heard.

DEWI J. WILLIAMS.